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All for Your Own Good: The Link Between Parental Psychological Control and Adolescent Self-identity, Anxiety and Depression

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Abstract. Research on the link between parental psychological control (PPC) and anxiety and depression in adolescents, as well as the role of self-identity (SI), is presented here. A total of 105 middle school students were selected as the subjects. PPC. First of all, PPC was positively correlated with anxiety and depression, but negatively correlated with SI. Second, SI partially mediates the path between PPC and anxiety, and the size of the mediation effect is 28.9% of the total effect. Thirdly, SI also indirectly affects depression to some extent through PPC, and the proportion of indirect effects in the total effect passing through this path was 32.7 per cent. That is to say, PPC may directly cause changes in adolescent anxiety and depression, and it can also reduce SI slightly and thus affect MH indirectly. In family education and school-based psychological intervention, one needs to help young people build a sense of self and reduce the feeling of psychological restriction.

Keywords: PPC, SI, Anxiety, Depression, Adolescents

1. Introduction

Many Chinese families have often told their children that certain decisions are made "for their own good", and this expression is usually out of care and protection for the child's future. Parents may believe that, due to their longer lives and more experiences, they know what is safer, more practical or better for their children. However, this expression can also have a more controlling nature in daily life at home. In the name of care, some parents have restricted their children's free will, failed to acknowledge the children's emotional needs, and provided unrealistic demands for interest. As a result, the children may believe that their opinions are not important to the adults and that obedience is valued above all else. Parents may also unconsciously project their own expectations, regrets or social pressures onto their children and hope that the children will take the path the parents deem successful. Though it is not driven by affection, this behaviour may also cause children psychological distress and reduce their sense of self-will. Therefore, this expression indicates that parents are concerned about their children and are also anxious about how to balance protecting their children with letting them grow up.

Academically, the kind of parenting mentioned above is parental psychological control (PPC). This unwelcome manipulation will hurt the children's feelings and inner worlds by making them feel

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guilty, leading to a withdrawal of affection, and so on [1]. Behavioural control generally aims to modify external behaviour; psychological control, on the other hand, can directly harm a child's self-esteem (SE), so meta-analyses have found that PPC affect anxiety and other symptoms of depression [2-4].

Young people are exploring their own lives at present. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development believes that the main problem at this time is the "crisis of identity versus role confusion". Erikson's theory of psychosocial development proposes that the main developmental crisis in adolescence is "identity versus role confusion", for example. Cao and others conducted a survey of 1,671 middle school students in 2025 and found that PPC is positively correlated with depression in adolescents; SE and self-concept mediate this relationship sequentially [3].

There are also some problems at home for the Chinese culture community. Traditionally, the values of family education in Chinese society have focused on respect for parents, obedience to parents and learning, etc. Parents are generally considered to be in charge of the children's lives and are expected to be obeyed and followed by the children. Based on the above cultural background, some types of psychological control may be regarded as care and responsibility or sacrifice instead of as pressure. For example, when parents interfere with their children's choices, use guilt-inducing language, or have high expectations for academic performance, they may believe that "parents know what is best for their children" and thus justify this behaviour. As a result, adolescents may fail to recognise that psychological control is a source of emotional stress, and parents are also unaware of its negative effects.

Theoretically, this problem can also be used to expand the scope of research on psychological control. It can be seen from the above that the meaning and effects of parental behaviour are also influenced by culture. Filial piety and a sense of responsibility towards the family are positive cultural values, but they can also limit the freedom of thought and growth for young people. According to the theory of self-actualisation, people need a certain degree of freedom, autonomy and self-realisation in order to realise their potential and form a healthy sense of self. If these needs are not met for a long time, teenagers may be anxious or self-doubting, emotionally withdrawn, and have problems with identity formation.

Therefore, the problem indicates that the system for family education in China should be modified to give more autonomy to individuals. Parents can still offer support and emotional support to their children, but they should also respect their feelings, choices and needs for growth. This can help the young people develop a healthier sense of self and independence. Based on the above research, the following hypotheses are proposed in this study:

H1: PPC is positively and significantly associated with anxiety and depression in adolescents.

H2: PPC is negatively correlated with SI (SI).

H3: SI mediates the path of PPC to anxiety and the path of PPC to depression.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Ten students in Grades 7-12 were randomly selected to take part in the survey and filled out paper-and-pencil questionnaires. A total of 105 were obtained. All the Questionnaires were manually checked. Reasons for exclusion: (1) Obvious patterned behaviour; (2) Missing responses exceeding 10% of the total items. Based on the above criteria, five invalid questionnaires were excluded, and 100 valid ones (effective response rate: 95.2%) were finally obtained. The sample was divided into 65 boys (65%) and 35 girls (35%), 75 middle school students (75%) and 25 high school students

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(25%), 15 only-child students (15%) and 85 non-only-child students (85%). The mean age was 14.2 $\pm$ 1.8 years.

2.2. Measures

PPC Scale: Based on the previous scale, the scale was rated at a 5-point Likert scale with 10 items [5]. A high total score indicates a relatively high PPC. Cronbach's α of the scale in this paper is 0.89.

SI Scale: Based on the previous scale, this scale has 8 items and is graded on a 5-point Likert scale [6]. Some of the scale items are positive and others are negative. A high score indicates a high level of self-awareness in a person. The Cronbach's α is 0.82.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7): It has 7 items and assesses the frequency of anxiety symptoms in the past two weeks. The score range for the items is 0 (Not at all) to 3 (Nearly every day). A high total score is relatively serious. Cronbach's α coefficient in this paper was 0.88 [7].

Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9): Kroenke and others first developed this in 2001 [8]. There are nine of them. The four levels of the rating scale are 0 (Not at all) and 3 (Nearly every day). A larger number is more depressing. Cronbach's α is 0.91.

2.3. Analysis

Descriptive Statistics, Correlation Analysis and Reliability Tests were carried out in SPSS 26.0. Hayes developed the PROCESS macro (Model 4) in 2018 [9] to conduct mediation effect analysis, and 5,000 bootstrap samples were used to obtain 95% confidence intervals (CIs).

3. Results

3.1. Common method bias test

Harman's single-factor test was carried out by unrotated exploratory factor analysis. The first factor explained a variance of 24.8% and was below the 40% threshold; thus, it was believed that the common method bias would not significantly impact the results.

3.2. Descriptive correlation analysis

PPC is positively correlated with anxiety and depression, and negatively correlated with SI. SI is low in anxiety and depression. Therefore, Hypotheses H1 and H2 are supported by the above results (see Table 1).

Table 1. Results of descriptive statistics and correlations

Variable	M ± SD	1	2	3	4
1.PPC	31.26 ± 8.57	1			
2. SI	27.43 ± 5.92	-0.41	1		
3. Anxiety	7.89 ± 4.35	0.45	-0.44	1	
4.Depression	10.58 ± 6.12	0.49	-0.48	0.65	1

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All the correlation coefficients met the statistical significance requirement of 0.01.

3.3. Mediation analysis

3.3.1. Mediation model with anxiety as the Dependent Variable (DV)

Based on the probable relationship among gender, grade level, only-child status and adolescent anxiety, the above indicators were added as control variables in the analysis. Adjusting for the factors listed above, PPC showed an increase in the total effect on anxiety. Add SI to the model and then check whether the direct effect of PPC on anxiety is still significant. SI was negatively correlated with anxiety; that is to say, people with a strong sense of self were less anxious and likely more resilient to emotional stress. The bootstrap results also showed that there was an indirect effect, and the confidence interval did not include zero. Overall, SI only partially mediated the relationship between PPC and anxiety (see Table 2).

3.3.2. Mediation model with depression as the DV

PPC has increased the amount of depression. Add SI to the model, and the direct effect of PPC on depression is still significant. SI was negatively correlated with depression; that is to say, adolescents with a stronger sense of self tended to have lower levels of depressive symptoms. Bootstrap results also show that there is an additional indirect effect, and the confidence interval does not contain zero. Based on the above results, SI partially mediated the effect of PPC on depression and thus supported Hypothesis H3 (as shown in Table 2).

Table 2. Bootstrap test of the mediation effect of SI

Dependent Variable	Effect Type	Effect Value	Boot SE	Boot 95% CI	Proportion of Effect
Anxiety	Total Effect	0.45	0.09	[0.36, 0.54]	100%
	Direct Effect	0.32	0.08	[0.24, 0.40]	71.1%
	Indirect Effect	0.13	0.04	[0.07, 0.20]	28.9%
Depression	Total Effect	0.49	0.08	[0.41, 0.57]	100%
	Direct Effect	0.33	0.08	[0.25, 0.41]	67.3%
	Indirect Effect	0.16	0.04	[0.11, 0.23]	32.7%

4. Discussion

4.1. The relationship between PPC and adolescent anxiety and depression

Based on the above data, parental psychological pressure is positively associated with feelings of anxiety and depression in adolescents. The above results are consistent with other studies [2, 10]. Pinquart and Chyung et al. have reached the same results [2, 10]. When parents use tactics such as creating guilt or withdrawing affection to control their children's behaviour, the children come to feel that they only deserve love if they meet their parents' expectations, thus experiencing "conditional love". Therefore, these young people have a sense of insecurity and are in a perpetual state of anxiety. When young people are repeatedly unable to meet the expectations of their parents with their own efforts, they may develop a sense of learned helplessness and become depressed.

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Correlation coefficients of PPC with depression (r=0.49) and anxiety (r=0.45) were relatively close, but psychological control appeared to be associated with a slightly higher degree of depression. Wang and Pomerantz have also published this result in [11]. Based on the above analysis, it can be inferred that a likely reason is that in the Chinese cultural context, prolonged erosion of self-esteem, particularly academic self-esteem, under psychological pressure may easily lead adolescents to form a stable self-negating cognition of "I am never good enough". Therefore, persistent depressive disorder is more likely to arise from such a general sense of inferiority than from changes in anxiety levels.

4.2. The mediation effect of SI

Mediation analysis can be used to study the effect of parents' sense of control over life on anxiety in teenagers. The SI effect explains a small proportion of the additional variance in both anxiety and depression related to PPC, at 28.9% and 32.7%, respectively. This is in line with the 2025 research by Cao and others, and it can be concluded that SI is responsible for this association [3].

Adolescence is a period in which one comes to know themselves and wants to be good; therefore, many roles and ideals need to be explored to build a sense of self. PPC limits the children's exploration. If the children's ideas are not paid attention to, their own choices will be limited and their inner feelings ignored; thus, they will not be able to form a stable and consistent Socially Oriented Society (SoS).

Adolescents in a state of identity confusion have a low Sense of Self (SoS-worth) and are therefore more sensitive to others' evaluations; as a result, they are less resilient to life's setbacks and more likely to suffer from mental illness.

PPC is in conflict with the requirement for autonomy set out in Self-Determination Theory. In the absence of independence for a long time, people will not be able to integrate external values and form a cohesive sense of self. A fragmented or confused SoS may result in a lack of psychological resources and reduced coping ability, thus creating a situation that is vulnerable to anxiety and depression [4, 12].

4.3. Reflections on cultural factors

"It is for your own good", Chinese parents often say out of concern for their children; however, this may also be a form of psychological control that restricts the growth of their self-consciousness (SoS). In light of the collective culture in China, PPC over children is both negative and positive; it may cause psychological stress for the children, but it is often seen as "care" by the children. The mean score of PPC in this study was 31.26 (out of a maximum of 50), and it was relatively high; thus, psychological control in Chinese families occurs to a certain extent.

According to the research by Zhou et al. in 2024, it was found that the level of PPC in their children had dropped in the final year of senior high school (Grade 12) [13]. The researchers proposed that, as the college entrance examination (Gaokao) is a very important time in people's lives, many parents have increased their support and actively avoid direct confrontation with their children, giving them more freedom. Parents' Psychological Control is not constant and changes with the circumstances.

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4.4. Educational implications

This study can provide some support for improving family education and school-based mental health services.

Based on the previous content, it can be concluded that parents' wish for control is usually to express their affection for their children. Many families believe that when parents guide and correct children's behaviour at home, these children will be safe from harm. However, if the care is mainly expressed in terms of control, children may start to feel that their own thoughts, emotions and choices are not fully respected. Parents should know when to guide children and when to allow children to live independently. Guidance is to provide advice, set reasonable limits and help children understand the consequences; control often means making decisions for the children according to parental wishes. Parents should help their children learn to think on their own, be able to express themselves and take the initiative for some things in life.

Second, parents should give unconditional love to their children more frequently. Children want to feel that their parents' love does not only come from grades, good behaviour and other achievements. When children are repeatedly told that "they are worthy of love no matter how well they do," they will be able to develop a sense of security, self-worth and emotional resilience. It does not mean that parents must be harsh or lose control; correcting behaviour should not be driven by anger. Parents can address bad behaviour at the same time and reassure children that they are still valuable as people.

Third, pay more attention to any changes in the children's feelings and moods and do not focus solely on school grades and behavior. Anxiety, quietness, mood swings, social withdrawal or changes in one's behaviour are all signs of internal stress. Be silent for a moment, hear your child's words carefully, and then ask a little general questions in your own words. Thus, family education can move away from managing behaviour and focus on supporting the all-around development of the young.

The model of mental health education in schools should incorporate an organised system for handling students' SI (Self-Management and Intrinsic) problems and not view these issues merely as problems of emotional regulation or academic pressure. Adolescence is a time when students are gradually answering questions such as "Who am I?", "What kind of person do I want to be?", and "How should I understand my strengths, weaknesses, and emotions?". Therefore, school-based mental health (MH) education can add a structured module on self-identity (SI) exploration to regular MH classes. These modules may contain narrative expression, values clarification activities, role reflection and guided small-group discussions. Through the writing of their own lives, sharing significant life experiences, or reflecting on what they want in the future, students can know more about themselves and realize that fleeting emotions or a poor grade are not the end of their lives.

Schools can organise some activities to help students accept their various selves as well. For example, teachers may have students discuss how a person can be confident in one situation but anxious in another, or how one can be both independent and need support. Therefore, the students' evaluations of themselves are not confined to one. Values-clarification activities can help students know what they need themselves and what others want from them. When students learn what is important to them, they can begin to develop an internal sense of self gradually. Small-group discussions are more suitable for teenagers because they can learn from the experiences of their peers, know that confusion and self-doubt are normal during this period of development, and develop a sense of belonging.

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At the same time, school mental health education should not focus solely on students. Since the family environment strongly affects teenagers' self-understanding, schools can also use the parent school system, parent meetings and online family education platforms to help parents better understand the psychological traits of adolescence. Parents should be aware that, in the effort to protect their children, excessive control may lead to a loss of freedom for the children and hinder the development of self-awareness. Parent education programmes have been organised by schools to help parents change their ways of talking with children, be more attuned to their emotions, and reduce problems such as comparing their children with others, causing guilt, or forcing children to accept certain ideas in their future. In combination with student-centered SI education, the school can provide better guidance for the family. The whole model can help young people form an all-encompassing, adaptable and relatively stable concept of themselves, thus boosting their overall mental health and resilience.

Investigate whether the "score-only" evaluation system has caused an increase in family anxiety among the public. When society believes that academic achievement is the main way for people to be developed, parental control behaviour may be considered reasonable and necessary.

4.5. Limitations and future studies

First of all, a cross-sectional design cannot show the causal effect of the variables directly. The following study will be an extended-observation design. Second, all of the data were self-reported by the teenagers. Some of the above studies have taken different sources of data, such as parental reports and teacher assessments. Third, the sample only included students from a single middle school; therefore, it may have been affected by particular factors of that region, urban/rural conditions and school culture, and the level of family parenting styles and adolescent mental health may vary among different types of schools. Therefore, the conclusions should be derived from the current group cautiously. Fourth, this study did not distinguish between maternal and paternal psychological control; separately, it will be studied in the future.

Among the above methods, this paper studies how to uncover the relationship between PPC and young people's MH in Chinese families. A mediating effect of SI has been observed, and further research will explore how to help adolescents break free from the external pressure of "it's all for your own good" and find themselves.

5. Conclusion

Parents' psychological regulation of their children, anxiety and depression in adolescents, and the mediating role of SI have all been investigated in this paper. The first few are as follows:

According to the above data, higher PPC can increase anxiety and depression and reduce self-esteem in young people, and self-esteem may indirectly affect the other two.

Parents have reduced the psychologically controlling behaviour they believe is out of love and instead provide unconditional love and freedom of exploration. School mental health curricula can systematically add SI exploration modules. At the level of society, further research is needed on the effect of "academically focused evaluation systems" and the increase in family anxiety.

This paper will determine whether the indirect path of SI in the connection between PPC and emotional problems in Chinese adolescents exists, and thus provide empirical support and specific routes for family education interventions and school-based mental health management.

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